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PREACHED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,

NOVEMBER 5, 1793.

By EDWARD PEARSON, B.D.

FELLOW OF SIDNEY-SUSSEX COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

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TO

THE REVEREND

WILLIAM ELLISTON, D.D.

MASTER OF SIDNEY-SUSSEX COLLEGE,

THIS SERMON

IS,

WITH SENTIMENTS OF RESPECT,

ESTEEM, AND GRATITUDE,

INSCRIBED.

Published by the same Author.

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A
S E R M O N, &c.

PROVERBS XXIV. 21.

MY SON, FEAR THOU THE LORD, AND
THE KING; AND MEDDLE NOT WITH
THEM, THAT ARE GIVEN TO CHANGE.

IT has sometimes been questioned, whether subjects of a political nature, in which there is necessarily room for a variety of opinions, can be discussed in religious assemblies, with any useful effect. It does not appear, however, that there is any foundation for this doubt, either in the nature of the thing itself, or from what has

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been actually experienced. If, indeed, *erroneous* opinions on such subjects be delivered in connection with the powerful persuasions of religion, there is cause enough to apprehend, that they will be productive of extensive mischief; a consideration, which ought to awaken the caution of those, who are liable to deliver them; but there is, I believe, no ground to imagine, that the mischief, which has thus been produced, is at all to be brought in competition with the benefits, which may reasonably be expected. That religion is properly employed in *exhorting* men to the discharge of their various duties, of *whatever* kind, will readily be allowed; or, if it should be doubted with respect to political ones in particular, we have the injunction of an Apostle to cite in its defence. To the generality of men, however, such an exhortation would be addressed to no purpose, unless the duties themselves were stated
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and explained. The bulk of the people have little time or opportunity for the minute investigation of discordant obligations. They must, after all, take many things for granted; and, if they do not learn their morality from their spiritual advisers, they will be left to seek it, where the chance is much more unfavourable to its being of a salutary nature, in casual conversation.

It will not, I hope, be imagined that, in saying this, I am contending for any thing, that would render our solemn meetings the occasions of serving personal interests, or make religion the instrument of a party. I mean not to assert it as a *privilege* of the ministers of the Gospel, but as a sacred *obligation*, that they suffer not the influence they have over the minds of their hearers, in any instance to remain unemployed, from an excessive apprehension which may be entertained

tertained of its abuse. The duties owing to the State, to the exercise of which almost every one, in this country, is liable to be called, are doubtless of an important nature; and there is, at least, as much danger of their being mistaken, as justifies, in other instances, the most careful preparation. Public instruction, however, on any of our duties, cannot, with propriety, do more than lay down the general principles of conduct. To apply them to particular cases, should be left to the wisdom and virtue of him, to whom they occur. For, while we are guarding against the evil of any one's deciding for himself, without proper previous instruction; we must not forget the danger he would incur in following, without examination, the opinion of another. With respect to political questions in particular, it is to be apprehended, that inexperience in public affairs, or a regard to private considerations,

siderations, may oftentimes render him unfit to be followed as a guide in action, whom yet, as a teacher, we may listen to with profit. Nothing indeed but what, when explained, is of an indisputable nature, ought to be enforced by the motives of religion; yet there will remain, under this and every just limitation, a very extensive field of useful instruction; and perhaps most of the advice, that is at all necessary to be given on political subjects, may, with propriety, be given from the pulpit. Inflaming addresses cannot be defended, because from those, whose minds are inflamed, nothing but mischief is to be expected; but, while we restrain the promoters of sedition, we should be cautious of establishing a principle, which would silence the counsellors of safety. With this impression of the utility to be derived from political discourses, I should not be deterred, by an ill-grounded prejudice,

dice, from entering on the subjects, suggested by the return of this solemnity, were I not also authorized by the institutions of our Church, and encouraged by the most respectable examples.

I SHALL therefore endeavour, on this occasion, *first*, to shew the great danger of attempting to subvert, by violence, any established government; and, *secondly*, to vindicate the happy event of the Revolution from the objections that might be drawn from this general principle.

WHEN Solomon gave the precept, which I have selected for a text, he addressed it to a people, who were under a form of government in some respects peculiar. The laws themselves were, for the most part, the institutions of divine inspiration; and the administration of them, though not always
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so wise as in the reign of Solomon, was supposed to be directed by the more immediate influence of the Deity. Under such circumstances, opposition to the government might properly be considered as rebellion against God; and the fear of the Lord, and of the King, would be duties of the same kind and degree. At a period too when, as in the days of Solomon, "Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine, and under his fig-tree, from Dan even to Beer-sheba;—when they were many, as the sand which is by the sea, in multitude, eating and drinking and making merry," there was but little temptation to resist the authority, to which they owed their protection and plenty.

THE obligation of the precept, however, does not *entirely* depend on the particular situation of those, to whom it was addressed.

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There is a sense, and an important one, in which all governments may be justly considered as the institutions of God; and whoever opposes them in this sense, incurs the guilt of opposition to God. It is, doubtless, the design of providence that, till mankind are much more disposed, than at present, to act rightly from principles of virtue, they should be restrained from wrong, by the fear of immediate punishment; and that this punishment should, in many instances, be inflicted by the judgement of their fellow creatures. But it is not to be imagined, that the authority, by which punishment is inflicted, can be suddenly transferred, without endangering, if not destroying, the habit of submission to it. All men, and especially those who have most need of it, would willingly live free from control. Independently of revelation, it is only a sense of the evils which would result, were
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every man to do "what is right in his own eyes," that can manifest the will of God, in this matter, or furnish an inducement to obey it; and we know, from experience, that, in a *numerous* body of men, these evils may be a long time endured, before the effect to be desired from them is produced. When the habit of submission is once broke through, it will not be easily renewed, though founded in reason; but the difficulty will be exceedingly increased if, as is the case in the bulk of mankind, it be chiefly the effect of imitation and custom.

It is not, indeed, to be denied, that one form of government is better than another; and that men may, not only innocently, but laudably, be employed, in endeavouring to bring about the best. Let it be remembered, however, that, in an *abstract* sense, there is no such thing, as a perfect form.

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The superiority of one above another must be determined by its suitableness to the circumstances of those, for whom it is intended. That which, from habits and prejudices already formed, is most likely to be best administered, is the best for the present; though there is no reason that it should preclude, as circumstances alter, the gradual introduction of another. Even despotism, which will easily be thought the least capable of defence, ought not to be irrelatively condemned. In some circumstances, it may be the best form possible. All human beings, for no inconsiderable portion of their existence, are necessarily under absolute control; and, in many instances, it must be acknowledged, the longer this species of rule is continued, the greater is the happiness produced. There is also a period of civilization, in which *societies* must be composed of individuals who, for the most part, are in

in a state of intellectual childhood; and in which, therefore, they cannot be so happy, as when directed by the will of the more improved few, or, it may be, of one. Were all the members of a community equal in wisdom and virtue, it would, perhaps, be a *plausible* objection to any form of government proposed to be established in it, that each had not an equal share in its formation, and an equal chance of participating in its administration. But, surely, no reasoning can be necessary to expose the futility of schemes, which proceed on a supposition so unlikely to be realized. It is, indeed, our duty, by instructing the ignorant, and admonishing the depraved, to render this more and more *like* truth; but, till it be accomplished, we shall do well to consider the danger of acting as if it were so; lest we find, when it is, perhaps, too late, that, while we

aimed at the good of the community, we were undermining its security, and arming folly and wickedness with the weapons of destruction.

BUT, whatever opinions may be entertained, respecting the form of government to be preferred, we may venture to lay it down as a maxim, with respect to the *manner* of introducing it, that, unless indeed where insupportable tyranny prevails, it ought not to be attempted, by offering violence to the existing legislative authority. Since no government is so bad, as not to be far better than anarchy, it should be the part of him, who engages in designs, which may eventually overturn an existing form, to consider well, what it is, in fact, that he shall be able to substitute in its stead. The " sudden calamity," which is predicted, in the verse subsequent to the text,

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as the sure consequence of such designs, has been too often and too fatally experienced. The atrocious attempt, which, by the gracious interposition of Heaven in its defeat, has contributed to make this day a "day of joy and gladness" to us, would doubtless, if suffered to take place, have been, at that time, destructive of the public security, and now the subject of lamentation. And, with respect to the present situation of a neighbouring country, though I would not indiscriminately censure all that has been done, much less condemn the intention of the doers, yet I cannot help regarding it as a fresh instance of the truth of the same prediction. That something was materially wrong, even in the early stages of that mournful business, the events, which have followed, will justify the most cautious in concluding. "They have," to use the words of an Historian on another
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occasion, " they have, in many instances, by propagating fictions, by promoting violence, and by lessening the reverence of what had ever been esteemed sacred, served to corrupt, as well as to infatuate, the people, to whom they made a tender of liberty and justice." They have done no better, at the best, than perpetrate evil, that good might come; a conduct, which, in the judgement of an Apostle, is worthy of condemnation; and for which, therefore, whatever advantages may eventually arise from it, nothing but punishment can be expected by the immediate agents.

WITH such an instance before us, we shall not perform our part, a useful though an humble one, if we neglect to derive, from the misconduct and misery displayed in it, a lesson of prudence to ourselves. In this country, we have already, in the opinion of

of those best able to judge, all for which the French can be justified in contending. But, be this as it may, there is certainly nothing, that we can reasonably wish for, which would compensate for the hazard of such a contention, as they have been the occasion to provoke. And if, as is generally the case in civil contentions; if, by a retrogradation in politics, authority, changing from hand to hand, should arrive where the physical strength is the greatest, and the wisdom to direct it the least, there will be just cause to apprehend, that we shall return, in the end, to the predatory state of independent and uncivilized life; or, if we survive as a nation, be rescued from the miseries of anarchy, at the loss of even salutary freedom. In his proper station, and according to his knowledge, let every one contribute his endeavours to advance the comforts, and to increase the security of
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social life. He may doubtless find opportunities enough, when his zeal will be employed with almost a certainty of success. But let no one, in aiming at ideal perfection in forms of government, or even attainable improvements, be induced, by the mere probability of distant good, to countenance measures, which are immediately and clearly detrimental. He, who is actually oppressed, will struggle to be free, and may have his excuse for doing so; but let us not, in the officiousness of charity, be too hasty in removing what, perhaps, we only *imagine* to be the oppressions of others. Let him, who would be praised for his perspicacity in the discovery of imperfections, recollect, that the knowledge of evil is not, for its own sake, desirable; and that he, who awakens others to the sense of ills, they would not otherwise have felt, without providing also a suitable remedy

medy, cannot justly be reckoned among the benefactors of mankind.

I PROCEED, in the *second* place, to obviate the objection, which might seem to arise, from the principles laid down, against the event of our own Revolution.

I AM aware of the imperfection, which, whether necessarily or not, is generally intermixed in every work of man; and, though the Revolution was, on the whole, so conducted, as to merit our commendation, no less than our gratitude; yet, to vindicate it in every particular, I should think a presumptuous undertaking. It is possible, that, as we have been told, "some of those concerned in it, were not altogether justifiable in the means they employed; and that, in some instances, more regard was paid to political, than to moral con-

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siderations."

siderations." But, in whatever respects they might be deserving of blame, they were not deficient in their endeavours to preserve, among the people, the habit of obedience to existing laws; nor did they, in any instance, so act, as to evince themselves lovers of change.

SOME have been misled, by the similarity of appellations, to consider that event as similar, in its *nature*, to what has been attempted in France. We shall find, however, on the slightest comparison, that they are scarce less different in the *object*, than in the means made use of to accomplish it. In the one case, opposition was not made to the *legislative*, but merely to the *executive* authority. In the other, the legislative authority itself has not only been controlled, but entirely subverted and destroyed. In the one, no classes of men, I

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had almost said no individuals, were deprived of rights, which they held by existing laws; and certainly none were so punished, as in the other, in consequence of *ideal* crimes, but in virtue of a judgement, provided by the law, or dictated by necessity, for the abuse of public confidence. No deviation from long established habits and prejudices was forced upon the people; nor was their obedience to be obtained, at the expence of every valuable affection. On the contrary, it was the real, as well as the professed object of resistance, to restore things to the point, from which they had been perverted; and to provide that, in future, the executive part of the government should be, as was intended, the faithful dispenser of the law. We know that, on many occasions, as is set forth in the *Declaration of Rights*, "things had been done by the King, in his individual capacity, which were

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directly contrary to the laws and statutes and freedom of the realm;" and that, by assuming a power, which was not legally invested in him, " he endeavoured to subvert and extirpate the protestant religion." But, in the management of governments, to *restore* and to *make new*, are attempts of so different a nature, that, from the success of one, but little judgment can be formed of the expediency of the other.

THAT some reformation was desirable in the government of France, no one among us, who has a proper sense of the blessings we are this day commemorating, will hesitate to admit. But we must conclude, from the result, that what was desirable was not, in this case, expedient; or, that the design of accomplishing it was extremely ill-concerted. The benefits of the best form of government possible, should they at length

length be obtained, will not, in the lapse of ages, compensate for the miseries, of which the struggle for them has been the occasion. In truth, setting aside the considerations of justice, there was reason enough to apprehend the failure of a plan, which aimed at so much. Individuals may be susceptible of instantaneous conviction, and be persuaded, by reason or caprice, to pass suddenly, in their sentiments and conduct, from one extreme to another: but it ought not to have been supposed, that a great nation could be brought, any otherwise than by gradual changes, to pass from the lowest to the highest degree of political freedom.

THE obvious use to be made of such reflections as these is, that each of us, instead of an useless, if not pernicious interference in matters, which are not properly

perly the subjects of his cognizance, and affording encouragement to those who are "given to change," make use of the power, which, from his station in society, he has legally and regularly in his hands, to augment the blessings of our constitution, and, if any such there be, to mitigate the pressure of its evils. If, in almost any form of government, this were conscientiously performed, there would be little occasion for measures of violence. I know, and lament, the distresses of poverty; and ardently do I wish, that a comfortable subsistence were the constant reward of honest industry: but I do not conceive, that this is possible to be effected, by any form of government, independently of the justice and charity of individuals in their private stations. In a country, where provision was particularly made against the prevalence of a too great inequality, it was yet foretold, that "the
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poor should never cease out of it." And it is, doubtless, the wise intention of Providence, that, by the wants of some, and the abundance of others, the virtues of patience and gratitude on the one hand, and of pity and generosity on the other, should be perpetually exercised and improved. Let us, therefore, direct our attention where, if there be not a certainty of our doing good, there is, at least, no evident danger of our doing harm. Let us not be induced, by the invitations of enterprizing men, to engage, at the expence of any known obligation, in what is of so uncertain termination, as theoretical schemes of reform. In the pursuit of a phantom, which will, perhaps, never be overtaken, and which, if overtaken, might elude our grasp, they may lead us from maze to maze, till, involved in inextricable difficulties, we find it scarce possible to retreat, though our advance must be marked with blood. Let

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us, after all, recollect, that human happiness does not entirely depend on forms of government. It must arise, in a considerable measure, from performances, over which external laws have but little control. And, of temporal happiness, whatever provision may be made for its security and increase, we may easily expect too great a share. He, who conceives that, under any circumstances, it can be perfect and complete, is sure to meet with disappointment. He will never be contented with present enjoyments, who does not aspire after future; and he alone, who, taking the whole of his existence into the account, knows how to estimate things at their real value; he alone is prepared to derive, from any imaginable situation, all the possible advantages, as well to bear patiently its unavoidable evils.

Now, to God, &c.



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